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**The Hidden "Essential Service":
The Impact of the Lack of Bus Service
On Social Service Agencies
And their Clients**

Social Planning & Research Council

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of Hamilton-Wentworth

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A United Way Agency



**The Hidden “Essential Service”:
The Impact of the Lack of Bus Service
On Social Service Agencies
And their Clients**

February 1999

By
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study could not have taken place without the support of many people and organizations.

A special thanks you to all the community agencies that took the time to complete our confidential survey and return it as quickly as they did. As well, to all the agency representatives and community members participate in our public meeting on a very snowy day.

To the Hamilton Street Railway for providing me with statistics.

I would also like to thank regional staff for coming to our community meeting and giving people vital information: Dave Vice, Branch Manager, Community Services and Linda Follows, Supervisor, Special Income and Hostels, Community Services.

And lastly, to SPRC staff Don Jaffray and Mark Fraser for helping develop the idea and framework for this study.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On November 2, 1998, the dispute between Regional government and the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 107 reached an impasse and public transportation in Hamilton-Wentworth came to a grinding halt. Initially, the public were slow to raise a voice, perhaps hoping that the strike would be short-lived, however as the dispute dragged on with little hope of resolution in sight, frustration and anger began to mount.

While the impacts on seniors, businesses and students were voiced, we heard little from the people who depend on social services in our community. We did not know if they were still able to access the services they needed. The Social Planning and Research Council decided to ask a small number of agencies if they, and their clients, had been affected by the bus strike.

The SPRC conducted a short survey in December of 1998 of select social service agencies from a wide variety of sectors. 14 surveys were faxed out and 13 agencies responded. An agency meeting was planned to review the results and seek feedback from surveyed agencies; however, wide-spread community interest in this study indicated that a broader-based consultation was needed. Therefore, a notice of the meeting was sent by fax by Community Information Services to all community agencies, notifying them of the meeting on January 13, 1999.

This study shows that people who depend on social service agencies were directly and negatively impacted by the loss of bus service in the region. The majority of agencies told us that they served fewer clients, there was a decrease in attendance at programs, an increase in appointment "no shows", and the added burden on staff to drive clients and to pick up the pieces left by volunteers unable to get to the agency.

Agencies tried to be flexible to accommodate their clients, doing more home visits, driving clients to programs and to see housing, and paying for volunteers to come into the organization. Even with this flexibility, people were still not able to attend counselling groups, employment-readiness programs, credit counselling, or any special events or workshops. Teenagers and young adults could not stay in school and families could not access food banks or clothing drives. Those in search of employment could not get to interviews and those with jobs could not get to their places of employment.

In conclusion, the bus strike had a negative impact on the people in this community who rely on public transportation to access essential social services. They incurred a hardship that does not reflect the will of a community espousing a commitment to sustainability and equal access to opportunity.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

On November 2, 1998 the inability of the Region and Local 107 of the Amalgamated Transit Union to resolve their differences, resulted in strike action which effectively shut down the Hamilton Street Railway local bus service in the Hamilton-Wentworth Region.

When the Hamilton Street Railway (HSR) strike entered its third month, public reaction to this transportation crisis began to escalate. Initially, people were slow to raise a collective voice, perhaps hoping that the strike would be short-lived, however, as the interruption dragged on, it appeared that the impacts of the lack of bus service became more profoundly felt. Holiday preparations and plans had to be reorganized or cancelled, and the cold weather and abundant amounts of snow after the new year made walking a difficult, if not impossible, task.

Statistics Canada tells us that 18% of working people in Hamilton-Wentworth rely on transportation to get to work, with almost a quarter of the working citizens (24%) of the City of Hamilton depending on buses to reach their places of employment. In numbers, that means 15,550 Hamiltonians depend on the bus to get to their jobs. Students at Mohawk College and McMaster University similarly need buses to attend classes, while businesses, especially those in the downtown core, need them to bring in shoppers and clients.

The Hamilton Street Railway sold 7588 special program annual bus passes for seniors in 1997, and sold 36,948 special monthly passes for seniors and students, an average of 3079 a month in the same year. From these figures, we can speculate that over 7500 seniors rely on the bus for much of their transportation year round, and that a further 3000 students and seniors rely on buses as their primary mode of transportation each month. (Hamilton Street Railway statistics, 1998).

The Regional Municipality of Hamilton-Wentworth has made a commitment to public transportation in their Vision 2020 "Strategies for a Sustainable Community" policy. The Vision 2020 Progress Team, in their 1998 evaluation of the progress of the Vision 2020 policy, again states the goal of the Region "to develop an integrated sustainable transportation system for people, goods and services which is environmentally friendly, affordable, efficient, convenient, safe and accessible" (Strategies for a Sustainable Community, 1998, Vision 2020 Progress Team, p.39). Stated strategies for meeting this goal include "Provide sufficient funding for public transit to make it more economical, more frequent, convenient and attractive to the user, increasing the share of public transit financed from taxes and advertising and decreasing the proportion financed from fares. (Revised)" (p.39).

While the Region has endorsed policy statements that embrace public transportation as one mechanism towards a more sustainable community, it would appear that it is not committed to meeting this goal. Statistics show that ridership has been steadily declining in our community over the last five years, except for minor increases in 1997, when McMaster University introduced its student bus pass program. In 1993, 21,526,041 rides were given by the HSR, by 1997 that number was down to 19,733,454, an overall decrease of 8.3%. This decrease directly contradicts the commitment to a sustainable public transportation system.

The lack of bus service hurt an already wounded downtown core, as the anticipated shopping rush for the holidays did not occur (The Spectator, December 22, 1998), and letters to the editor in the Spectator began taking on an angrier, more frustrated tone. Yet the bus strike continued on, seemingly with no end in sight.

While both sides pleaded their case publicly, it appeared that people were beginning to care less about who was right and who was wrong in the dispute, and more about how the lack of public transportation was hurting our community and citizens.

While the impacts on seniors, businesses, and students has been voiced, we heard little from the people who utilize social services in our community. Are they still able to get the assistance that they need without buses? Social service agencies provide a variety of essential services to the citizens of our community, from assistance in finding affordable housing, to employment-readiness programs, to probation and parole, to family counselling, to credit counselling, to settlement services, through to health care in other languages. The Social Planning and Research Council decided to ask a small number of agencies if they, and their clients, had been affected by the bus strike.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

The SPRC conducted a short survey in December 1998 of select social service agencies from a wide variety of sectors, including; housing, health, family, child, corrections, employment, disability, cultural, legal and food banks. 14 surveys were faxed out and 13 agencies responded, for an incredible response rate of 93% (Survey attached as Appendix A).

A community meeting was then held to review the results of the survey and to seek further input from agencies. It was originally intended that this meeting would be for agencies who had received the survey, but wide-spread community response to this study indicated that a broader-based consultation was needed. Therefore, a notice of the meeting was sent by fax by Community Information Services to all community agencies, notifying them of this meeting. (Notice attached as Appendix B).

3.0 RESULTS

Part A: Results of the Survey

Question 1: Have the services your agency provides been affected by the interruption in local bus service? If so, how?

All 13 (100%) of the responding agencies said that their service had been affected by the interruption in local bus service. 92% said that they were serving less clients, while 55% said that they had experienced a decrease in volunteer use. 70% of agencies said that their programs had not changed, but two qualified this close-ended question by adding that there was a decline in attendance at the programs. 30% of agencies said fewer programs were being offered.

Question 2: Has your organization made any program changes due to the unavailability of local bus service? If yes, please describe.

Most agencies (74%) reported that they had made program changes due to the unavailability of local bus service. Program changes included: groups for low-income families and children cancelled because participants could not find transportation; cancellation of meetings with clients and volunteers for a corrections agency; rescheduling all course start dates and enrolments; and, doing more home/school visits. Changes in the agencies' transportation role included: staff required to pick up clients, therefore working through lunch; transporting clients and volunteers to the agency; driving people to look for housing; and, implementing volunteer driver assistance for specific events/workshops.

Other changes included: re-writing job descriptions of workers who relied on public transit, reduced hours for staff without transportation; car pooling wherever possible; and, expanded use of volunteers to answer the increased volume in phone calls from clients who could not physically come to the office for service.

Question 3: Please describe your agency or clients' experiences or concerns as a result of the unavailability of local bus service?

Experiences of Agency

When asked to describe their agencies experiences or concerns, agency replies fell into six categories: impact on staff; inability of clients to access programs and services; providing transportation to clients; increased costs to agencies; cancellation or changes in programs; and finally, decreased use of volunteers.

The following responses are described in descending order, from most frequently mentioned, to least frequently mentioned.

Impact on Staff

Agencies said that their staff have been very affected by the bus strike. Staff are risking lay-offs because they cannot get to work. One agency reported that 50% of their staff rely on public transportation and that only so much "take home" work can be assigned to them. Car pooling is one way staff are dealing with this problem, however, car pooling puts added time on workers who drive (they leave earlier and get home later).

Staff are also having a hard time attending community meetings; are incurring costs to themselves by driving clients to appointments; are spending more time driving and therefore seeing fewer clients; and are feeling an extra burden of work because volunteer support has dropped off as volunteers are unable to get to agencies.

Inability of clients to access programs and services

Agencies report that they have lost "quite a few clients" , and one agency said that even with staff offering to drive, people are still not able to attend programs, perhaps because staff do not have car seats for clients children. Job clubs have seen a drop in membership, and agencies have experienced an increase in failed appointments and no shows. One agency has seen a significant decrease in the number of clients served in all [of its] programs. Fewer people are coming for help and fewer people are receiving help because staff are spending more time travelling. One agency worries about the pent up need and anticipates being very busy when bus service returns.

Providing transportation to clients

Agencies are saying that they have experienced a major impact trying to provide transportation to clients, either by staff or volunteer drivers, or by paying for taxis. Staff are spending more time transporting people; to essential (sometimes court ordered) appointments, in cases of emergency, to secure housing, to attend workshops or activities, and to find employment.

Increased costs to agencies

Agencies are also experiencing increasing costs due to the unavailability of public transportation. Many agencies appear committed to their volunteer base by covering the costs of transportation for taxis. One agency is paying the cost of transportation for volunteers at a rate of \$90 a week. Others are seeing increases in staff transportation expenses because of home visits. Those that cannot afford this cost have lost valuable volunteer contributions of time and energy.

Cancellation of programs or changes in service

One agency reported cancelling programs, which has increased stress on families who are already very isolated; another said that they offer more telephone advice, then individual client interview.

Decreased Volunteer Support

Agencies that are unable to pay the transportation costs of volunteers have noted a decrease in volunteer support, which has meant an increased burden on staff. Volunteers simply cannot get to agencies without bus service.

Experiences of Clients

When asked to describe their clients' experiences or concerns, agency responses fell into the following three categories: inability to access to programs/services; inability to afford the costs of alternative forms of transportation; and inability to maintain employment or look for work.

Inability to access programs, services or appointments

Overwhelmingly, agencies report that clients are not able to access programs or services, and cannot get to appointments with professionals like lawyers and doctors, or social assistance workers or immigration appointments. People who live outside of walking distance to the downtown cannot access the special Christmas assistance provided by downtown agencies.

They cannot get to agencies to look for housing, to receive credit counselling, to attend courses or workshops, or to attend groups. Volunteer driving programs, such as the Red Cross, are seriously over booked, with one agency reporting that clients are waiting two weeks for a booking. Agencies working with adolescents say that they are having difficulty staying in school, others that clients cannot make court appointments. One agency said that clients cannot even get to the grocery store.

Inability to afford the costs of alternative forms of transportation

Just as overwhelmingly reported was the inability of clients to afford taxis as an alternative to bus service. Agencies were adamant in their assessment that their clients could, in no way, afford to access services or programs, school, or appointments, by using taxis as a form of transportation.

Inability to maintain employment or look for work

Lastly, many agencies also reported that clients were unable to maintain employment or to look for work because of the lack of bus service. Clients on OntarioWorks community placements cannot afford taxis to get to placement and therefore there is the potential that they will be disqualified for social assistance benefits. (Note: We checked this out with Regional Community Services and we assured that no one would be cut off of OntarioWorks because of the bus strike). One agency reported that "clients have refused job offers due to their inability to afford taxis to work. Some clients health prevents them from walking long distances, so they have restricted their job search to closer areas which reduced their opportunities for work." Another reported that "many clients cannot get to job interviews."

Other Comments

While there was not a section for other comments on the survey, some agencies did write additional comments. One said that "public transit is an essential service" and another directed a comment to the HSR/Regional Government/Transit Union "try doing your daily business without any transportation and see how it feels!"

Part B: Results of the Community and Agency Meeting

Agency and Community Comments

The following feedback was received at the community meeting attended by approximately 35 people held by the SPRC at the Self Help Centre on January 13, 1999 - 11 weeks into the strike.

Workers are being impacted by the strike. One agency representative said that front-line workers are spending \$300 - \$400 a month on transportation to get to work. Their budgets do not allow for this added expense. The working poor population count on buses the most, and this is a growing population in our community. Some workers and volunteers are unable to get to work, thereby interrupting agency service to clients. Other workers have experienced a loss in income because they have been unable to get to work. Some have relocated themselves with friends and family during the strike.

Many agencies reported that clients are having difficulty accessing their services. The number of phone calls to agencies has increased dramatically, putting additional pressure on agencies to meet this need. People cannot conduct housing searches, are unable to get to soup kitchens and foodbanks, and are not being seen by volunteers who mentor to them in the school system.

Some agencies have had to cancel home visits because they could not find a worker to serve the client, and some clients are not getting consistency in terms of workers or times of visits. One agency, in organizing their winter coat drive for families, preregistered 297 families in October (prior to the bus strike) for the coat pick-up. On November 7, the day of the pick-up, only 164 families attended. 133 families did not come into the centre to pick up winter coats. Since we can assume that families who registered for the coats must indeed be in need of winter outerwear, then 133 families in need must have been unable to come in that day to pick them up. While some might have found coats in other places, it is likely that many could not afford alternative forms of transportation to get to the pick-up site. The need is still there, the transportation is not.

One agency representative said that clients do not care why the strike is dragging on, only that they cannot access the services that they need. There is increased human suffering because of the strike, as people feel isolated and alone. One agency said that they have noticed that their clientele is becoming increasingly stressed. New refugees to the area are especially hard hit by the lack of bus service.

Students in special education programs have been unable to get to school. Teachers say that these students will not return to programs because of this interruption; the impact of which will be long- lasting, if not life-long lasting for these students. All school children dependent on the buses are affected by the strike, as well as their parents.

Information Sharing

There was also an information sharing time during the meeting. Regional staff made it clear that OntarioWorks participants will not be suspended from benefits or punished in any way for being unable to meet interview requirements for employment. Clients who are currently on Ontario Disabilities Support Program (ODSP) are eligible to receive \$58 dollars for bus transportation to medical appointments. During the strike, this money is being used for cabs. If people are finding that this is not enough money to get them medical appointments, they can call Special Income services at 546-4883.

OntarioWorks participants are also eligible for transportation money for medical appointments, however, they need to speak directly to their workers about this. The Region is not providing money for everyday transportation for groceries, banking, etc. Some students are eligible for transportation dollars through support services for parents on subsidy.

Action Plans

The group did not decide to work collectively to try to bring an end to the bus strike, but brainstormed a number of actions individuals and agencies could take to this end.

- ▶ present this report to tell councillors how the interruption in service is impacting on people's lives
- ▶ an official message could be sent to Regional Council by front-line workers and by Board members of agencies
- ▶ encourage people to call their council members and transit union, asking them to return to the table
- ▶ agencies should take a position and be more vocal to put pressure on politicians
- ▶ agencies could help to organize a media blitz of stories, since the media has an impact on politicians and the union
- ▶ people should attend rallies, and ways should be found to transport people to rallies
- ▶ organize transit users
- ▶ people need to be reminded that they vote and to remember this issue at election time

Fortunately, the dispute was settled shortly after the community and agency meeting took place. Many of these actions did not take place, with the exception of a couple of rallies held around the same time as this meeting, but are listed here in the event that such a situation should arise again.

4.0 SUMMARY

The response to this survey was remarkable. Not in recent research history at the Council has a survey been so overwhelmingly completed and returned. The response rate alone suggests that the lack of public transportation is an important issue to social service agencies trying to provide many types of assistance to the people of Hamilton-Wentworth. And their responses tell us that agencies are being affected in their mandates to provide service to community members because of the absence of bus service. The majority of agencies are serving fewer clients, and there has been a decrease in attendance at programs, an increase in appointment "no shows", and the added burden on staff to drive clients and pick up the pieces left by volunteers who can no longer get into the agency.

What the survey also shows us is the flexibility of agencies trying to accommodate and serve their clients. Staff are picking up clients for counselling groups, taking clients to look at housing, and doing many more home visits because of the lack of public transportation. The strain on staff and volunteer budgets must be enormous, yet their commitment to their clients is obvious. However, staff cannot go without lunch breaks indefinitely, and winter weather will increase the length of time it takes to do a home visit, thereby further reducing the number of home visits staff can make.

A research assistant at the SPRC has been working with families identified as living in risk conditions, studying their social networks and individual capacities, as well as the capacities of our community to support these families. Each visit is taking longer and longer as mothers tell her how isolated they now are because of the strike.

One young mom stated "The only problem in my life is buses" and went on to tell the researcher that she could access all the supports she needed if only there were buses. She could not get to the doctor, the foodbank, the library, or out for Christmas shopping and could not afford the cost of cab fare as an alternative to the bus. When the buses started running again, the level of excitement in these families was palatable.

Agencies are trying to meet the needs of their clients in this difficult situation. Some are incurring extra costs for transportation, and staff are stretched trying to drive clients to important appointments or doing home visits. Such an effort will eventually cause staff burnout and budget overload. And still people are not able to attend counselling groups, employment-readiness programs, credit counselling, or any special events or workshops. They cannot get to the library so that they have reading material to pass the time at home. Teenagers and young adults cannot stay in school, and families in need cannot access food banks or clothing drives. Those in search of employment cannot get to interviews and those with jobs cannot get to their jobs.

We must conclude that the bus strike has had a negative impact on the citizens of this community who rely on bus service to access essential social services, and that depriving these citizens of this service is unacceptable.

The buses did not run in Hamilton-Wentworth between November 2, 1998 and January 22, 1999. During this long 12 week absence of public transportation, many people in our community were isolated, unable to get to work, to shopping, attend school, be a volunteer, or access many community services. The hardship they incurred does not reflect the will of a community espousing a commitment to sustainability and equal access to opportunities.

APPENDIX A

survey

SPRC

December 7, 1998

The Social Planning and Research Council is trying to determine if there are any measurable impacts on people using community or social services in the Region, as a result of the interruption in local bus service. We would appreciate it if you could help us with this assessment by taking a few minutes to complete the following short survey. Your response will be kept confidential. Agencies will not be identified by name and only aggregate data will be released in our report.

It is our intention to make the results of this exercise available both to the community and to regional government.

1a. Have the services your agency provides been affected by the interruption in local bus service?

☐ Yes

☐ No

1b. If yes, how? (Please check one box per row)

☐ more clients served

☐ no change

☐ less clients served

☐ increased use of volunteers

☐ no change

☐ decreased use of volunteers

☐ more programs offered

☐ no change

☐ fewer programs offered

2a. Has your organization made any program changes due to the unavailability of local bus service?

☐ Yes

☐ No

2b. If yes, please describe



3. Please describe your agency or clients' experiences or concerns as a result of the unavailability of local bus service.

Agency: _____

Clients: _____

Please fax this survey to the SPRC at 522-9124 by Monday December 14

Thank-you for taking the time to complete this survey. If you have any questions or suggestions, please call Suzanne Brown at 522-1148 ext. 310.

APPENDIX B

Notice of meeting



BUS STRIKE IN HAMILTON AND ITS IMPACT ON COMMUNITY SERVICES

The SPRC conducted a small survey of selected agencies in order to gain a clearer sense of the impact of the bus strike on community services. The results are cause for concern. Impacts appear to be significant in terms of reduced access to service or people in need, increased costs for agencies, interruption of programs and complications for volunteer support.

We invite you to a meeting to discuss the results of this study and consider further actions to take, if any, in responding to these impacts. This meeting is planned for:

Wednesday, January 13, 1999

12:30 – 1:30 pm

Self Help Centre Auditorium

255 West Avenue North

(coffee & cookies will be provided)

If you can attend this meeting please call and we will forward to you a draft copy of the survey results to aid in your preparation for the discussion. Thanks for your interest in this matter.





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